ELSEVIER

Available at WWW.MATHEMATICSWEB.ORG POWERED BY SCIENCE DIRECT®

Journal of Applied Logic 1 (2003) 107–118

JOURNAL OF APPLIED LOGIC

www.elsevier.com/locate/jal

The word of others

Steffen Borge

Department of Philosophy, 541 Hall of Languages, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244, USA

Abstract

Tyler Burge has argued that one has an *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe in the truth of what one takes to have been presented as true by an interlocutor. This thesis, however, is problematic, since the alleged *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe in the truth of our seeming understanding of things presented as true to us, rests on the possibility of determining assertoric force on a purely intellectual basis. This thesis is not plausible and Burge's analogy from memory does not support it. Two routes for defending Burge's thesis of the *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe in the truth of what has been asserted can be identified: the Transcendental Route and the Intrinsic Rationality Route. David Lewis' account of linguistic convention would serve as a transcendental argument for the *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe in the truth of what has been asserted, but flaws in Lewis' theory leave us deprived of any good transcendental argument for such an entitlement. The Intrinsic Rationality Route is in better standing, but we have yet to see an argument for why we should resort to that measure.

Keywords: A priori; Tyler Burge; Testimony; David Lewis; Convention

1. Introduction

Tyler Burge has maintained that the concept of *a priority* primarily applies to a person's justification or entitlement to believe something [3,4]. His surprising view is that we have an *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe or accept the word of others. In this paper I examine that view, paying special attention to Burge's so-called Acceptance Principle, which has it that you are is *a priori* entitled to accept what a rational source presents to you as true. Burge reaches his Acceptance Principle through a critique of Roderick Chisholm's view of the *a priori* [6]. On Chisholm's account, any intrusion of introspective or empirical experience in the process of coming to know something discounts a belief

E-mail address: steffenborge@yahoo.com (S. Borge).

1570-8683/$ – see front matter
doi:10.1016/S1570-8683(03)00006-5

from *a priority*. Burge suggests that, by contrast, we do better in adopting the Acceptance Principle as a guide for *a priori* justification, and that the *a priority* of certain memory-based and testimony-based beliefs can be secured within that framework. There are several problems, however, with this idea.

I shall argue that Burge's line depends crucially on the possibility of determining the assertoric force of expressions on a purely intellectual basis. It does not seem plausible to say that the grasping of the assertoric force of an utterance is *a priori* in nature. Nor is his argument by analogy that proceeds from memory convincing.

Even if we grant that assertoric force can be determined intellectually, there is still a question of how we get from the fact that a certain proposition has been asserted, to the truth of that proposition. In this connection, the supposed *a priority* of our entitlement to trust will be examined. In this connection, I suggest that Burge would do well to enlist David Lewis' account of the conditions for using a language, but that flaws in the latter make trouble for Burge's view [9,10]. One might, on the other hand, argue that it is intrinsically rational to go from the fact that a certain proposition has been asserted, to the truth of that proposition. We have yet, however, to see convincing arguments for why we should resort to that measure. I suggest in conclusion that we lack strong grounds for endorsing *a priority* for believing in testimony.

2. Burge's critique of Chisholm

According to Chisholm, the only truths of reason that are *a priori* acceptable are *a priori* axioms, those you immediately see as true, or else truths which follow from *a priori* axioms by evident entailments. Once you understand an *a priori* axiom, you immediately see that it is true and it becomes certain for you [6, p. 120]. Propositions that are attained through more complex or longer demonstrations do not have *a priori* status. The proofs in such cases rely on memory and that deprives them of *a priority*. Chisholm writes [6, pp. 123, 124]:

> What if *S* derives a proposition from a set of axioms, not by means of one or two simple steps, but as a result of a complex proof, involving a series of interrelated steps? If the proof is formally valid, then shouldn't we say that *S* knows the proposition a priori? I think the answer is no.
>
> But if, in the course of a demonstration, we must rely upon memory at various stages, thus using as premises contingent propositions about what we happen to remember, then, although we might be said to have 'demonstrative knowledge' of our conclusion, in a somewhat broad sense of the expression 'demonstrative knowledge', we cannot be said to have an a priori demonstration of the conclusion.

But as Burge points out there is no principled difference between short and long demonstrations. Chisholm's line on memory thus threatens to undermine the *a priority* of any belief that is arrived at by inference from more basic premises [3, p. 463]:

> Even one-step demonstrations could go bad if the reasoner's short-term memory were defective enough. So if we take vulnerability to memory failure as a sign that a justification of reasoning must *make reference to* memory, no reasoning at all will be independent of premises about memory. This is unacceptable.

The reluctance to credit *a priority* to the propositions Chisholm mentions is founded on mistakes: First, a belief that *a priority* must give us infallibility. Burge suggests here, by contrast, that it is enough that *a priority* confers warrant for a proposition to be *a priori* (and known *a priori*). Second, and even more crucially, Chisholm fails to distinguish between two roles that memory can serve, viz:

(1) Preservative Memory: An agent that is engaged in deductive reasoning can call up information from memory and apply it in the ongoing proof. A belief is stored in memory and then activated when the need arises. According to Burge, in such a case the justification of the remembered proposition turns on how it was acquired. If the proposition was originally *a priori* justified, then the proposition when called up from memory remains *a priori* justified, even if the agent is no longer in a position to access that justification. Remembering a theorem that one has proved entitles one to use it. Burge's suggestion is that this is how the faculty of memory contributes to deductive reasoning, when we directly call up propositions we remember.

(2) Substantive Memory: Sometimes memory does make a substantive contribution to the justification of a remembered belief. When we remember specific events, objects, experiences and attitudes, then the memory of these functions as a justification of the empirical belief that these memories are meant to support. In the case of substantive memory, note, the very content of the memory-grounded belief is about the past. By contrast, in the case of preservative memory, the content of the belief that memory preserves may not at all be about the past.

The difference between the two types can be brought out, though Burge does not do so, in the following way. (1) I remember that there are more reals than naturals. Here we activate our belief that there are more reals than naturals. We have in one manner of speaking the testimony that P from memory, and our focus is on the proposition expressed and not on the interlocutor expressing it. (2) I remember that I used to be very confident that there are more reals than naturals. In this our cognitive attention is not merely focussed on the proposition that there are more reals than naturals but also upon the *attitude* of our earlier self towards the proposition. One might go on, of course, to form the judgment that there are more reals than naturals, but in this case it would seem that substantive memory about the past would play a substantive role in the justification of the mathematical proposition. Merely being presented with a proposition from memory, on the other hand, has an immediacy to it that makes considerations about the process of content transfer or considerations about the interlocutor's attitude superfluous.

Preservative memory, for Burge, preserves thoughts and their assertive mode without adding to the justification of a proposition [4, p. 37]. In the intrapersonal case of preservative testimony from memory we are *a priori* entitled to believe what is retrieved. Burge goes on to suggest that the case of interpersonal testimony is parallel: In both cases propositions are presented to us as true, and in neither case does the justificatory force of one's

belief depend upon considerations about the interlocutor, whether that interlocutor be one's earlier self or another self.

3. Burge's acceptance principle

Our purported *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe in testimony from memory in the intrapersonal case paves the way for Burge's Acceptance Principle, which he formulates as follows [3, p. 469]:

> *A person is apriori entitled to accept a proposition that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so, because it is prima facie preserved* (*received*) *from a rational source, or resource for reason; reliance on rational sources—or resources for reason—is, other things equal, necessary to the function of reason.*

It is important to see the emphasis that is put on the *prima facie* aspect of the Acceptance Principle. Burge's position is a default position [4, p. 21]:

> I argued that in interlocution we have a general *a priori prima facie* (*pro tanto*) entitlement to rely on seeming understanding as genuine understanding. And we have a general *a priori prima facie* (*pro tanto*) entitlement to believe putative assertions that we seem to understand. These are two rational default positions.

If we think we understand something then we are *prima facie* entitled to regard our understanding as genuine understanding and to believe what we understand in the absence of defeaters. The immediate understandability of what I seem to be told entitles me to believe in the presented proposition. Of course, if I have the additional information that I am being confronted by a liar or that the person speaking to me sounds like an English speaker but is in fact attaching different meanings to the words he utters, then my entitlement is defeated. But in the absence of defeaters, my entitlement persists and is *a priori* in nature. I am then entitled to act on the information that this rational source gives me and thus take it to be true. I am *a priori prima facie* entitled to regard the content of the utterance as true.[1]

For Burge the Acceptance Principle is not an empirical principle that tells us what people as a matter of fact believe they are entitled to believe. You need not be able to state why or on what basis you have these entitlements in order for you to be justified in relying on them. And you do not need to be able to access the relevant entitlements in order to be

[1] Assume, for example, that I heard the English sentence "The house is on fire". Am I now epistemologically obliged to check with the world or to investigate further the rational status of the speaker before I rush down the stairs? There might be epistemologists who would rather burn than accept something like an *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe in testimony. The common sense answer, however, is that you can and ought to act on testimony. But notice that a Humean account of testimony can also have this entitlement. Experience teaches us that people tend to say what they believe and their beliefs are generally true, so we are entitled to act without first having to check out the credentials of the speaker in this particular case [8, pp. 111–113].

entitled to believe in what you have received from a rational source. How then do these entitlements differ from say entitlements we have to believe something when the source of beliefs is sense perception?

Ordinarily we trust our sense experiences, if we are not given specific reasons for distrusting them. But the beliefs so arrived at do not have *a priori* warrant since they are perceptual beliefs whose justification is grounded in their tie to sense experience. It is natural to think that the same is the case with testimony. If you say that P, and I believe you, then my belief in P has a justification whose basis is, in part, a perceptual belief about what words came out of your mouth. Burge thinks very differently. It cannot be disputed, of course, that the words that came out of your mouth and the sense experiences that they elicited in me were causally responsible for my belief. But for Burge there is a crucial distinction between the kind of case in which sense experience provides a justificatory basis, as opposed to the kind of case in which it plays merely a causal role. When it comes to testimony, the role of sense experience is, according to Burge, of the latter sort.

4. Force and mood in relation to a priori entitlement

Burge's argument relies on two key theses. Suppose someone asserts that P. In the paradigm case of testimony, I form the belief that P has been asserted and then, on that basis, form the belief that P. Insofar as there is *a priori* warrant for the belief that P so arrived at, this will require that both the premise that someone has asserted that P and the inference from the fact that someone has asserted that P to the conclusion P enjoy *a priori* warrant. Competitor views will hold that one or both of the premises and the inference are empirically justified. I suggest that we should examine separately whether each enjoys *a priori* entitlement. Let us begin, then, with the question whether one has *a priori* entitlement in this sort of case to suppose that someone has asserted that P. I shall suggest first that this thesis has little intrinsic plausibility and that second, the analogy with preservative memory does not help.

There is, of course, a phenomenological plausibility to the thesis that we grasp the intelligibility of certain sound wave pressures in a direct and unmediated fashion. We do not first perceive a set of sounds and then, by inference, figure out what the sounds mean.[2] But grasping a propositional content is not the same as grasping it as asserted. We can understand some of the seeming intelligible content of an utterance without knowing what speech act has been performed ([1, pp. 95–99]. See also [2, pp. 284–287]). Illocutionary force and grammatical mood are conceptually independent. That a sentence is in an indicative mood does not directly establish that the content has been asserted. And even if it did the difference between serious and non-serious language use complicates the picture. Merely grasping that an utterance is intelligible and a declarative expression does not directly entitle you to assuming that it has been asserted seriously.

How do we know, when we grasp the content of an utterance, that the speaker has presented it as true, rather than that the speaker has questioned whether it is true, or

[2] Though perhaps this does go on in some subdoxastic cognitive module. I shall not try to exploit that fact here.

commanded us to make it true, etc? And why does the former give us special epistemic entitlements? When we grasp the content of an utterance, that content does not seem to come to us marked as an assertion. Burge, however, thinks otherwise [3, p. 481]:

> Understanding content presupposes and is interdependent with understanding the force of presentations of content.

Burge then goes on to claim that [3, p. 482]:

> The connection between declarative mood and presentations-as-true is conceptual. The justificational force of the entitlement to rely on the connection is correspondingly conceptual, not perceptual.

No one has yet, to my knowledge, shown that or how force is entailed by an utterance's grammatical form nor have I seen a convincing argument for the purported conceptual connection between assertoric force and declarative grammatical form. That assertions generally are in an indicative form only gives us a regularity of language use. When an expression is taken in splendid isolation from the context of utterance, the question of force is underdetermined. We can, at least, have a partial understanding of the content of an utterance without knowing the force of the content in question (as when a person overhears a pretend assertion made in a play without knowing that it is only a pretend assertion). This observation strengthens the idea that the force of an utterance is something we come to grasp in the context of utterance and that this context then constitutes an essential element in the process of grasping force. Whether or not the contextual elements, which play a role in determining force, take place at a conscious or sub-conscious level is of no importance. If we abstract away context, then we are left with either no determining factors of the force of an expression or the implausible and unsupported claim that *every* meaningful expression in indicative mood shall *prima facie* be regarded as an assertion. This strongly suggests that our perception of indicators of communicative intentions play a role in our grasping the force of an utterance.

The content does not present itself as true; someone presents it as true. To be justified in believing that the rational source has the appropriate communicative intentions for having asserted that P, if this is not explicitly said, one needs to refer to contextual elements such as tone of voice, facial expressions, environmental factors, how it fits in with the ongoing the speech exchange, etc. The empirical elements present in grasping the force of an utterance seem not only indispensable, but also constitutive of the justification. Burge disagrees [3, p. 478]:

> When we receive communication, the situation is different. The objects of cognitive interest—the contents and their subject matters—are not the objects of perception. We do not perceive the contents of attitudes that are conveyed us; we understand them.

Granted. We do not directly perceive the content of attitudes or the attitude behind a contentful expression in the way that we perceive the colours of a painting; but neither do we read off communicative intentions from the content in order to determine the force of an

utterance. Notice that there are other psychological phenomena that have the same sort of epistemic immediacy: for example, understanding that a person is in emotional distress. We do not perceive that a person is in emotional distress in quite the way we perceive the colours of a painting. But we have no inclination *there* to suppose that our entitlement to a belief that someone is in emotional distress or acceptance of that being the case is *a priori* in nature. Why should the situation be any different when it comes to someone's intentional states and, in particular, their communicative intentions? The perceptual cues in grasping the force of an utterance do not always function as reasons we would state for why we believe that a content has been asserted, but that does not mean that their contribution is not substantial. Similarly: the perceptual cues in perceiving emotional distress do not always function as reasons that one might offer for the thesis that someone is in emotional distress, but that does not in any way render the latter belief non-empirical. And if one only hypothesizes that the appropriate communicative intentions underlie the presented content, then this is an empirical hypothesis, which destroys the *a priority* of an entitlement to believe that the content has been asserted and it would furthermore not count as a case of grasping the force of an utterance. And if we have no such *a priori* entitlement, then we have no *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe in the truth of the content, since we have a no *a priori prima facie* entitlement for the belief that the content aims at truth.

What then of the analogy with memory? Let us recall the distinction between the two kinds of cases of memory of some proposition P: (1) One stores a belief that P, which then becomes activated on an appropriate occasion. Here I agree with Burge: It is very plausible to suppose that if the belief that P was arrived at on an *a priori* basis, the preservative role of memory does not destroy that *a priority*. (2) One recalls that one confidently judged that P on some occasion. Perhaps one then goes on to believe P on that basis. This does not seem like purely preservative memory. Here, when one regains the belief that P, the basis does not have an *a priori* entitlement. The role of memory is substantive. Interpersonal testimony, insofar as it has an analogy with intrapersonal testimony, is analogous with cases of type 2 and not ones of type 1. Of course one could construct an interpersonal case of type 1. Suppose my storage system for mathematical beliefs is directly hooked up to your brain, so that when the mathematical question whether P suggests itself to you, the relevant belief arrived at by you is directly channelled to my "judgment box". That mode of transmission would not, perhaps, destroy *a priority*. But testimony is not like *that*. Just as memory plays a substantive role in cases of type 2, where an empirical belief about one's past attitudes is provided by memory, so perception plays a substantive role in ordinary testimony, where an empirical belief about illocutionary force is provided by perception.

5. The entitlements of trust

Even if one sides with Burge on the question of understanding the relationship between mood and force, there is still the problem of getting from an *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe that the content has been assertorically presented to an *a priori prima facie* entitlement to believe in the truth of these presentations. And conversely, even if one agrees with the thesis of the last section, one might still try to extract a strand of truth from Burge's discussion if one agrees with him that the inference from "He asserted that P" to "P" has

a priori warrant. In the last section, I rejected the idea that one has *a priori* entitlement to believe that a content has been asserted. On the question whether the inference from the latter belief to the truth of the content is *a priori* warranted, my verdict will be rather less decisive.

The question here is of entitlement to trust: According to Burge we are *a priori* (defeasibly) entitled to trust that any asserted content is true. In what follows, I shall offer two routes for defending Burge here, what I shall call the "Transcendental route" and what I shall call the "Intrinsic rationality route".

(1) The Transcendental Route: Suppose one adopts David Lewis' theory of convention [9,10]: one will then have a solid basis for the *a priority* of the inference from "*P* is asserted" to "*P*". One will claim that participating in a regularity of trust in some language *L* is a condition of using that language. According to Lewis something is a convention for a language speaking population *LP*, if (1) everyone, with a possible exception of a few, conforms to some regularity *R*. (2) Everyone believes that the others conform to *R*. (3) This, in turn, gives everyone a good and decisive reason to conform to *R*. (4) There is an alternative R' that could have functioned like *R* for *LP*. (5) Finally there is a general preference for conformity to *R* rather than a slightly-less-than general conformity. (6) Conditions (1)–(5) are common knowledge [10, p. 165]. A language, on Lewis' conception, is a function from strings of sounds or of marks to meanings. What is it for there to be a convention of trust in some function from strings of sounds or of marks to meanings? Roughly speaking, it is to engage in a regularity whereby one raises one's subjective probability in the truth of the propositions associated with some string of sounds or of marks by a function upon witnessing the assertoric use of that string [10, p. 187]. In effect, it is then a condition of using a language that one tends to believe the propositions that are asserted.

Suppose Lewis is right. There is now in place the beginning of a transcendental argument for the rationality of trust. Rather than trust being a regularity that is opted for only on the basis of a good deal of empirical evidence counting in its favour, it turns out that trust is a regularity that is non-optional for any user of a language. Trust is a condition of being a language user. Admittedly, such a line of thought would need some extra shoring up. Perhaps it might be responded that in some circumstances, one is forced to be irrational in order to use a language and thus while trust is a condition of using that language, language use brings irrationality with it. Nevertheless, the line of thought seems genuinely promising. Agree with Lewis about trust and it looks as good as the best transcendental arguments for the rationality of a certain practice, and better than most.

But is Lewisian trust really a condition of being a language user? I will argue that no more than expectation of sincerity, what I call Communicative Trust, is needed for someone to use a language *L*, and thus the notion of Communicative Trust is closer to whatever it is that turns out to be the correct picture of the nature of language use and testimony. The Lewis picture, however, demands more than only expectation of sincerity [10, pp. 172, 187]:

> For trust, one must be able to take an utterance of a sentence as evidence that the sentence is true. That is so only if one's degree of belief that the sentence will be uttered falsely is low, not only absolutely, but as a fraction of one's degree of belief—perhaps

> already very low—that the sentence will be uttered at all. Further, this must be so not merely because one believes in advance that the sentence is probably true: one's degree of belief that the sentence will be uttered falsely must be substantially lower than the product of one's degree of belief that the sentence will be uttered times one's prior degree of belief that it is false.
>
> We can say that someone is truthful in L with respect to indicatives if he tries not to utter any indicative sentences of L which is not true in L. (...) He is trusting in L with respect to indicatives if he believes uttered indicative sentences of L to be true in L.[3]

The phrase "truthful" with respect to indicatives is ambiguous between "telling the truth" and "telling what you believe the truth to be". Lewis opts for latter when it comes to speakers of a language L. A speaker is truthful in L as long as he is sincere. The notion of "trust" with respect to indicatives when this is understood as expectation of truthfulness is ambiguous between "expectation that what has been asserted is true" and "expectation that the speaker is sincere, though perhaps mistaken". Trust, in Lewis' sense, requires expectation that what has been asserted is true. Perhaps using a language requires less. Expectation of truth is one thing. Expectation of sincerity is another. While Lewisian trust requires (simplifying only a little) that one believe what one is told, Communicative Trust requires that one believe that the speaker believes what one is told.

The following example shows that Lewisian trust is too strong of a requirement as a condition of what it is to be a language user, since there can be a shared language L while there is no regularity of the required kind in L of believing in the truth of what has been asserted. Suppose there is a ten-person community. Five of them are "listeners" who assert very little but who listen and understand perfectly well conversations by the other five "talkers". The listeners know that the five talkers are systematically deceived about the world around them. For whatever reasons the listeners do not try to correct the talkers. They issue orders sometimes. They even make sincere assertions sometimes about subject matters that do not touch those myriad areas where the talkers are deceived. Perhaps the talkers believe a community on Mount Olympus is overseeing them and talk all the time about how the Olympians are manifesting their presence in the world. The listeners understand but do not correct; perhaps they do not wish to hurt the talkers' feelings and so on. Here a pair of conventions operate in L: truthfulness, i.e., sincerity in the language spoken, wherein speakers only assert for the most part what they take to be true, and expectation of truthfulness, i.e., expectation of sincerity in the language spoken, where hearers for the most part reckon what is asserted to be what is believed. The key regularity R underlying a convention of expectation of truthfulness, i.e., expectation of sincerity is simply this: R operates with respect to a particular function F from strings of sounds or of marks to meanings, just in case hearers take an assertoric use of any string S as rea-

[3] See also, ibid, p. 167. "To be truthful in L is to act in a certain way: to try never to utter any sentence of L that are not true in L. Thus it is to avoid uttering any sentence of L unless one believes it to be true in L. To be trusting in L is to form beliefs in a certain way: to impute truthfulness in L to others, and thus to tend to respond to other's utterance of any sentence of L by coming to believe that the uttered sentence is true in L".

son to believe that the speaker believes the proposition P associated with S by R.[4] This, however, does not confer any entitlements, *a priori* or not, to believe in the truth of most assertions in L, since all you get is a regularity of believing that the speakers believe what they assert.

Conclusion: There is no good transcendental argument for the rationality of Lewisian trust that proceeds from the premise that Lewisian trust is a prerequisite for using a language in the first place. You could have language community that only had a regularity of Communicative Trust in that language, while there was no operative regularity of Lewsisian trust among its members. The latter then is obviously not a defining feature of what it is to be a language user or language community. Whatever virtues there are to Lewis' theory of language and language use it is not going to help us explain why or how it is that we are *a priori prima facie* entitled to believe in the truth of what others tell us.

(2) The Intrinsic Rationality Route: Perhaps we should not try to defend the *a priority* of the inference from "X believes P" to "P" on the basis of a transcendental argument. Perhaps one might try to simply assert that it is intrinsically rational, in the absence of defeaters, to believe what one knows someone else to believe. This seems to be Burge's own line. He seems to treat it as intrinsically rational to assume that believers are rational, and further, intrinsically rational to assume that rational people get things right. Of course we can imagine rational people getting things wrong. But Burge's idea seems to be that it is intrinsically rational to operate with the default assumption that thinkers get things right ([3, p. 470], my italics):

> One can ask why one is entitled to rely on rational sources (or resources for reason), in view of the fact that they might be mistaken or misleading. This is tantamount to a traditional sceptical question about how putative rationality or justification is associated with truth. One can apparently imagine systematic misconnections between being justified (entitled), according to ordinary canons, and having true belief. Why then should one ever think that ordinary canons provide ground for belief? I will not take on scepticism here. I will assume that we are rationally entitled to rely on reason, memory, and perception. The Acceptance Principle is an extension of this assumption: *we are rationally entitled to rely on interlocution because we may presume that it has a rational source*.

And furthermore ([3, p. 471], the second italics are mine):

> A source is a guide to truth *in* being rational. Rational mistakes are possible. But if there is no reason to think that they are occurring, it is *rational to accept* the affirmed deliverances of a rational source.

[4] And if, like Lewis, one likes to give a Bayesian gloss on things, then one might like to gloss "reason to believe" in the framework of subjective probabilities, where the contrast between the *prior* probability of a speakers believing some P and the conditional probability of the speaker's believing P on asserting S (where F associates P with S) is exploited.

And in his 1997 paper Burge writes [4, p. 34]:

> The entitlement in interlocution rests on a *prima facie* conceptual relation between assertions, reason, and the truth about the subject matter.

Similar moves have been made elsewhere in epistemology. Strawson argued famously that it is rational to project from the past to the present on the grounds that this is just what it is to be rational. And Stewart Cohen attempts to discount the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis on similar grounds [7, p. 112]:

> While we may concede to the skeptic that we lack evidence against radical skeptical hypotheses, I do not think we should be willing to concede that it is not rational to deny these hypotheses (believe they are false). If so we can view the denials of these hypotheses as intrinsically rational.

Burge's take on the inference thus very much belongs to a cluster of epistemological claims whereby discussions about whether it is rational to believe P are brought to a close by an appeal to intrinsic rationality, bypassing any need to evaluate evidence for P. Perhaps this is the most promising way to go here. But such appeals to intrinsic rationality seem to be best employed as a sort of last resort. Lacking any sort of evidence against brains-in-a-vat hypotheses, Cohen resorts to an appeal to intrinsic rationality as a sort of bulwark against skepticism. But we have plenty of empirical evidence that we belong to a community where people get things right across a certain range of subject matters. Why invoke intrinsic rationality when one is not forced to? Such claims are inevitably very hard to evaluate. What is the methodology supposed to be for evaluating a claim of intrinsic rationality? Burge, like Cohen, gives us no guidelines for understanding the notion of "intrinsic rationality" as it appears in these sorts of arguments, apart from whatever intuitive grasp we might already have of the notion.[5] Pursuing Burge's line on the relevant inference would seem to force us towards one of the murkiest corners of epistemology.

6. Conclusion

Burge claims that when we are told that P, we have first, a defeasible *a priori* warrant for the belief that we have been told that P and second, a defeasible *a priori* warrant for the inference from the latter belief to a belief that P. The first claim, I have suggested, is altogether implausible. The second claim is somewhat more plausible: yet we have far from decisive reasons for embracing it.

[5] There is no reply to this query to be found elsewhere in Burge's writings. Burge's "Computer Proof, Apriori Knowledge, and Other Minds" [5] deals with problems closely related to the ones dealt with in [3,4] but it does not help us with understanding what the notion of "intrinsic rationality" amounts to and how to evaluate claims that makes appeal to it.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to William Alston, Mark Brown, Johan Klüwer, Philip Peterson, Mark Scala and Mark Steen for comments on earlier drafts. Most of all I thank John Hawthorne for extensive discussions and comments on the issues involved in this paper as they have developed through various drafts.

References

[1] J.L. Austin, How To Do Things with Words, 1962; Reprinted: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994.
[2] A. Bezuidenhout, Is verbal communication a purely preservative process? Philos. Rev. 107 (1998) 261–288.
[3] T. Burge, Content preservation, Philos. Rev. 102 (1993) 457–488.
[4] T. Burge, Interlocution, perception, and memory, Philos. Stud. 86 (1997) 21–47.
[5] T. Burge, Computer proof, apriori, and other minds, Philos. Persp. 12 (1998) 1–37.
[6] R. Chisholm, The truths of reason, in: Theory of Knowledge, 2nd Edition, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1977; Reprinted in: P.K. Moser (Ed.), A Priori Knowledge, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987.
[7] S. Cohen, How to be a fallibilist, Philos. Persp. 2 (1988) 91–123.
[8] D. Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, 1748; Reprinted in: L.A. Selby-Bigge (Ed.), Hume's Enquiries, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989.
[9] D. Lewis, Convention, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1969.
[10] D. Lewis, Languages and language, in: K. Gunderson (Ed.), Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Vol. VII, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 1975; Reprinted in: D. Lewis, Philosophical Papers, Vol. I, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983.